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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [NI](#)  
SUBJECT: NIGERIA: "PATRIOTS" ASK OBASANJO TO  
FOREGO SECOND TERM

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER FOR  
REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

1. (C) Summary: Chief Frederick Rotimi Williams, prominent Lagos attorney and charter member of the "Patriots", a group of prominent Southern and Middle Belt figures, told Ambassador Jeter on October 21 that the "Patriots" had issued a public statement urging President Obasanjo not to seek re-election because his quest for re-election was creating too much political tension. Moreover, the "Patriots" believe that and that the time is now ripe for a President from the South-South. Despite championing a South-South Presidency, Williams could not readily name one viable candidate from that region. As part of their deliberations on reducing electoral tension, the "Patriots" also proposed single term limits for the President and State Governors. Williams likewise called for a National Conference to explore constitutional changes that would allow all geopolitical zones equitable participation in national leadership. Williams felt that former military Head of State, Ibrahim Babangida, as well as current Vice President Abubakar Atiku would be unacceptable presidential candidates in the South. Joining the Ambassador at the October 21 meeting were PolCouns and Lagos PolOff. End Summary.

2. (C) During a visit to Lagos, Ambassador met Chief Rotimi Williams at his law firm on October 21, to discuss the "Patriots" October 15 press statement. Williams, an imposing man with a venerable presence, told the Ambassador that the "Patriots" saw Obasanjo's quest for a second term as the primary factor in Nigeria's roiling political equation. If Obasanjo disavowed his ambition, politics would calm considerably, Williams stated. Thus, for the sake of political sobriety and equilibrium, the "Patriots" concluded that Obasanjo should forego a second term. Williams continued that, by eschewing a second term, Obasanjo would be helping to forge a new political reality in Nigeria. For the next elections and for the first time in Nigerian history, the Presidency should go to the South-South. By stepping aside, Obasanjo would be helping to facilitate this unprecedented development. According to Williams, the struggle for national power in Nigeria has been a struggle between the three most important ethnic groups: North/Hausa-Fulani, Southwest/Yoruba and Southeast/Igbo. Consequently, the victorious political alliance would always be the one that joined two of these three dominant groups. Competition for national political power has always centered on these groups with the usual winning combination being a North/Southeast axis, leaving the Yoruba as the odd man out.

3. (C) The North has used its perceived numerical majority to claim superior, almost exclusive, title to national power, the veteran lawyer argued. Unfortunately, "The [purported] Northern majority has not been properly taught how to exercise its majority right," he asserted. This numerical majority had been used to gag the political aspirations of the lesser ethnic groups, and because the larger ethnic groups were not adequately enlightened, Williams saw a one-term presidency to be rotated among the six geographical zones as key to a more equal distribution of national power.

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THE "PATRIOTS": AN OCCASIONAL GATHERING OF  
EMINENT PEOPLE  
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4. (SBU) The "Patriots" are an informal group that meets on an ad hoc basis to discuss national issues. Originally, the group had seventeen members drawn predominantly from the South and Middle Belt. In the years since its 1998 inception, the group has only publicized the results of their deliberations on two previous occasions. Thus, the "Patriots" October 15 recommendations that the President and Governors be limited to one five year terms attracted significant media attention and have helped generate much public debate. A look at the credentials of some members of the group shows why its opinions matter.

--The current Chairperson is Chief Frederick Rotimi Williams, one of Nigeria's most eminent lawyers. Williams has served in senior government positions since the mid-fifties and was Chairman of the Constitutional Committee that drafted the 1979 Constitution.

--Chief Richard Akinjide is also a prominent attorney and recently represented Nigeria before the International Court of Justice in the dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon over the Bakassi peninsula;

--Chief Felix Ibru is from a wealthy family that owns "The Guardian", the second largest newspaper in Nigeria, as well as the Lagos Sheraton;

--Chiefs Abraham Adesanya and Ayo Adebajo are members of the preeminent Yoruba group, Afenifere;

--Professor Ben Nwabueze, lawyer, businessman, and professor of constitutional law is General Secretary of Ohaneze Ndigbo, the Igbo leadership group from the Southeast region. Nwabueze is a long time associate of former Head of State Babangida;

--Dan Suleiman is retired military and a prominent Middle Belt figure remembered for having been forced into exile for having opposed late military dictator, Sani Abacha; and

--Chief Matthew Tawo Mbu has had a long and successful career as a businessman and head of many government Ministries. He is from Delta State in the South-South region and is the leader of the Union of the Niger Delta, a leading socio-cultural group much like Afenifere and Ohange.

EVERYONE SHOULD GET THE CHANCE TO BE PRESIDENT

15. (C) The dominance of national power by the three biggest blocs has progressively embittered the Southern minorities, according to Williams. Although the South-South was the fount of the nation's wealth, it has remained economically poor and politically disadvantaged. Continuation of this unjust situation would speed the day of Nigeria's social and political explosion, he warned. Thus, the "Patriots" hoped that a South-South President would emerge in 2003. While the "Patriots" realized they were asking Obasanjo to give up his personal right to contest for office, rising dissatisfaction among the minorities in the Delta could lead to violence, Williams feared. Obasanjo should sacrifice his personal desires for the national good. "Now is the time to rotate the Presidency to the South-South region, "the Patriots have all agreed that, to continue as a nation, the ethnic minorities must be heard."

16. (C) However, the articulate Williams stammered when the Ambassador asked him to identify a viable candidate from the South-South. Williams could only respond that he hoped the South-South would put forward a credible candidate if given the opportunity. He expressed confidence that there were qualified people in the South-South. These politicians should be given a chance at national leadership and not excluded simply because they did not have enough ethnic kinsmen to buoy their political status.

17. (C) Ambassador asked if a minority candidate from the South-South region might raise public fears in other zones that this area had finally gotten control of the oil revenue and would try to monopolize it. Williams countered that a candidate from the South-South would bring the issue of resource and revenue allocation into the arena of public debate. "We believe," he said, "that there should be a budget allocation to the Federal Government derived from the resources of each state." But the each State should be the primary beneficiary of resources within its borders. Off-shore resources, he continued, must be controlled by the Federal Government because only the Federal Government can and should maintain the functions such as border patrols and coast guard necessary to protect those resources.

18. (C) Williams continued that the "Patriots" had long supported a "National Congress" to allow all groups, but especially ethnic minorities, to "air their views and political aspirations," and propose changes to the constitutional structure to allow fuller participation and end the alleged "second class" political status of the ethnic minorities. The Constitution should be changed so that every group has an

opportunity to qualify for leadership of the country.

#### OBASANJO VS. THE "PATRIOTS"

19. (C) When the Ambassador asked Williams about Obasanjo's reaction to the Patriot's suggestion, Williams said Obasanjo rejected it. The President felt he had a right to contest and did not want to surrender that right. Obasanjo had been personally affronted and "very annoyed" because many of the "Patriots" were long-time friends and associates. He felt the "Patriots" should have discussed their proposal with him privately before going public. Williams contended that this was not a private matter but an issue of national concern requiring public debate. Ambassador Jeter questioned whether the fact that prominent members of Afenifere were part of the "Patriots" group would hurt Obasanjo's bid for re-election in that it looked like some important Yorubas were now against him. (Comment. Afenifere is the most influential organization in the Yoruba Southwest. Although Yoruba, Obasanjo did not carry this region in the 1999 elections. The Alliance for Democracy (AD), which is closely associated with Afenifere, controls most of the Southwest. End Comment.)

10. (C) Williams explained that the "Patriots" opposed the impeachment threat against Obasanjo because it was ill-timed, based on questionable motives, and could raise ethnic tensions. The impeachment was perceived in the Southwest as an assault by Northern politicians against a Yoruba, albeit not a very popular one. Thus, the "Patriots" opposed impeachment because it would damage the political system in their view; they opposed Obasanjo's second term for the same reason, he contended. When asked whether the "Patriots" "tried to save Obasanjo (from impeachment) so that he could sacrifice himself (not seek reelection)," Williams nodded in agreement.

WELL ALMOST EVERYONE

11. (C) The Ambassador asked Williams whether the South would accept former military ruler Ibrahim Babangida or current Vice President Abubakar Atiku as President. Williams was adamant that elevation of either to the Presidency would risk "the unity of the nation." Despite the current four years of a Yoruba President, the "Patriots" believe that the Northern "ruling class" had held power for too long; now was not the time for a Northern President. When asked about a candidate from the Southeast, Williams stated that since the Igbos have only held power during the abbreviated Ironsi military government in the sixties, an Igbo President would not be objectionable. He noted several possible candidates from the Igbo Southeast. When asked about reports that the North was courting the Southeast to finger a pliable Igbo candidate and that the "Patriots" stance could actually be facilitating this agenda, Williams shrugged, acknowledging the possibility.

12. (C) There is no significant political event in Nigeria without the Babangida factor attached to it. The Patriot's statement is no exception. Rumor has it that IBB warned Igbo members of the "Patriots" that power would shift to the North in 2007 for at least eight years. Thus, the chances of these old men seeing an Igbo President within their lifetime was nil unless that happened in 2003. Consequently, when the "Patriots" met, the Igbos unleashed a brutal indictment of Obasanjo which changed the course of the discussion toward the eventual conclusion that Obasanjo should not run. However, some "Patriots" were angered by the group's statement. They claimed they were not invited to the meeting because of their alleged pro-Obasanjo tendencies, and they have publicly disavowed the October 15 statement.

COMMENT

13. (C) The "Patriots" like many other groups are trying to help Nigeria find a way out of its current political impasse. However, despite the claim to be elder statesmen, the "Patriots" are not a detached, dispassionate group. The October 15 statement was peppered by political considerations. For a variety of reasons, many "Patriots" dislike Obasanjo and the October 15 statement reflected that. Because it was endorsed by some prominent Yoruba figures, it caused Obasanjo some unexpected damage. However, given the fluidity of political events now, that damage might not be permanent as the memory of the statement is eclipsed by the frenzy of other political events.

14. (C) On another level, Williams' assertion about a South-South Presidential candidate and the end to the top three ethnic groups'

dominance seemed surprisingly naive if taken at face value. Clearly, not all the "Patriots" agreed with this position. Last week, Ohaneze Ndigbo met with the Northern leadership group, Arewa Consultative Forum. That meeting produced a public statement against Obasanjo's second term. We can be almost certain that the participants also discussed conditions for resurrecting the North-Southeast political axis that has been successful in the past. Contrary to Williams' assertion that the "Patriots" back a South-South Presidency, the Ohaneze leadership has been carrying the torch for an Igbo Presidency and it is doubtful that Ohaneze will voluntarily extinguish that flame.

15. (C) Perhaps Williams has staked out this position in order to hedge possible Yoruba political losses. Maybe he and others sense that Obasanjo is a less than an even bet ( a growing belief among political pundits, even some of Obasanjo's own men). Instead of backing the wrong horse, some Yorubas may have decided to champion the idea of a South-South Presidency as the best possible alternative. If the Igbos were convinced this was a good option, this plan of a united South would keep national power in the South, thus preventing the historic North-Southeast alliance that has often resulted in the Yoruba Southwest being on the losing side of national elections. Second, a South-South presidency would keep power out of Igbo hands. For historic reasons, Yorubas and Igbos do not repose much trust in each other. Yoruba Leader Olufemi Awolowo undermined the Igbo leader Nnandi Azikiwe's quest for national power in the late sixties. Since then, political cooperation between the two groups has been minimal. Older Yoruba leaders like Williams probably still fear that the Igbo still bear a grudge. Moreover, the Yorubas may back the idea of a South-South minority President because they believe they can influence a South-South incumbent. The Southern minorities historically have been wary of Igbo domination, and are more comfortable with the Yorubas. If this is Williams' tack, then his support for a South-South President is not based on principles of fairness for the ethnic minorities but concern that the North-Southeast alliance not be repeated to the detriment of Southwest in the 2003 elections.

JETER